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## **Major sporting events and geographies of disability**

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## **Abstract**

Major sporting events for athletes with disabilities have become part of a strategic agenda to create positive social legacies for those typically marginalized in their communities. These events are subject to strict guidelines set forth by the International Paralympic Committee to deliver broad based accessibility. In some cases, changes to accessibility are temporary, where in others upgrades remain as permanent fixtures for venues, transportation, and public spaces. However, the temporality at the heart of major event projects can also work against long-term, sustainable improvements to the material conditions persons with disabilities face as they experience the urban realm. In this paper, we draw upon case studies of the Glasgow 2014 Commonwealth Games and the Toronto 2015 Parapan American Games to explore the value of major sporting events in delivering urban accessibility improvements and offer a critical commentary on the limitations of the event project to herald sustainable change.

## **Keywords**

Critical Disability Theory; parasport; major sporting events; geographies of exclusion; urban accessibility

## Introduction

*The brand-new palaces of sport, which I encounter are beautifully smooth. Just too big. And the problem comes at the edges, where they join the old world. Tackling one new perfectly smooth bit of access, I am blocked abruptly by the lack of a dropped curb. Leaving the Velodrome, I descend a ramp to an existing road, where the join looks insignificant but stops me dead. Elsewhere, gravel scattered on paving jams my computerised push rims and my chair has a tantrum (Reid, 2014).*

The controversial decisions surrounding the awarding of the FIFA World Cup to Qatar in 2022, China's hosting of two Olympic and Paralympic Games and the political, economic and social problems associated with the Olympic and Paralympic Games in Rio, Brazil in 2016 have been well documented. The social costs associated with major sporting events on the welfare of workers, citizens and local communities are foregrounded in the global media. Yet, major sporting events continue to be presented as a force for good - a panacea for urban regeneration, tourism and economic development, infrastructural improvements and drivers for increased sports participation (Carey, Mason & Misener, 2011; Foley, McGillivray & McPherson, 2012). With the rise of the Paralympic movement, there is a growing belief that disability sport events (hereafter, parasport events) can result in even broader positive social outcomes than are purported for able bodied events (Misener, 2015; Weed & Dowse, 2009), though there is limited empirical evidence to support these claims.

The inclusion of athletes with disabilities in major sporting events has been viewed as a means of creating social legacies for those typically marginalized in their communities (Cashman & Darcy, 2008; Darcy, 2001; Misener, Darcy, Legg & Gilbert, 2013). Major sporting events that include parasport disciplines are now subject to strict guidelines set forth

by international governing bodies including the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) around broad based accessibility and inclusion. Moreover, event hosts make bold statements about enhancing the accessibility of venues, transport networks, civic spaces and other urban infrastructures as a result of their hosting status. For example, organizers in Rio emphasized that hosting the 2016 Olympic and Paralympic Games would improve “the social, physical and environmental fabric of the city” (Rio2016, 2013). However, hosting disability sport events also focuses attention to the clear distinction between disability represented on the sporting field of play, and the everyday experiences of citizens within and outside the sporting environment. Elite athletes with a disability are often represented through heroic narratives of perseverance and overcoming obstacles despite their disability (Silva & Howe, 2012; Bush, Silk, Porter & Howe, 2013). Spatial alterations to sport venues and other urban infrastructures can serve to highlight the insurmountable physical and social barriers that preclude participation for persons with disabilities in everyday sport and physical activities.

In this paper, we explore the spatial dimensions of disability in the urban environment, drawing on two different types of major sporting event: the Glasgow 2014 Commonwealth Games, an integrated event, where athletes with a disability participate in the overall sporting programme; and the Toronto 2015 Parapan Am Games, which function on the model of the Paralympic Games, containing separate parasport events. We begin by setting out the theoretical grounding of the paper, drawing on the lens of critical disability theory (CDT) and related ideas around geographies of exclusion. We then discuss the role of sport spaces and experiences of disability, before describing the research design for the study. The study’s main findings are introduced and then discussion focuses on the extent to which the two major sporting events under consideration produced tangible and sustainable benefits to persons with disabilities once they came to a conclusion.

## **Critical disability theory and geographies of exclusion**

Critical disability theory (CDT) is predicated on, but goes beyond, the social model of disability. CDT situates disablement not simply as a function of physical impairment, but as an outcome of the interaction of the impairment with the social environment, including how social, economic and political structures either function to enable or disable members of society. Though broadly positive about the shift away from a medicalized model of disability, the social model has been viewed by some to be incongruent with the study of socio-material space because of its disembodied nature (Butler & Bowlby, 1997). Gleeson (1999) argues that the social model's emphasis on "attitudinal structure and/or aesthetic construct" reduces attention on "how these ideological realities are formed" (p. 21). Pinder (1995) also notes that the relationship between impairment, the individual, and the environment is not as unambiguous as the social model often reflects. From the CDT perspective, attitudes, social support, communication and information, and physical structures each need to be addressed if the constraints or barriers experienced by persons with disabilities are to be overcome. Our focus for this paper is primarily on information and physical structures because these considerations are closely aligned with the rhetorical statements made by major sport event bodies and hosts alike when justifying their investment in one-off event projects.

Urban geography, urban studies, and disability studies provide further support for the value of the CDT perspective. Over the last two decades, there has been a growing recognition that persons with disabilities are collectively excluded, marginalized, or invisible in public space (Butler & Bowlby, 1997). Imrie & Edwards (2007) talk of,

geographies of exclusion, in which institutionally unjust and socially oppressive practices, through the actions of actors and agents, were intertwined in the production of places marked by the exclusions of particular social groups, such as disabled people (p. 626)

Gleeson (1999) has argued that persons with disabilities have been oppressed, socially and spatially, by the production of space because space is a “social artifact...shaped by the interplay of structures, institutions and people in real historical settings” (p. 2). CDT further emphasizes that through the exercise of power in urban design, persons with disabilities have been rendered invisible or powerless (Chouinard, Hall & Wilton, 2010). From a materialist geography perspective the “historical and geographical organisation of cultural-material life shapes all social experiences, including disability” (Gleeson, 1999, p. 9) and disablement is “deeply inscribed in the discursive, institutional and material dimensions of cities” (p. 11). These discursive, institutional and material dimensions marry with CDT, including the accessibility of the built environment, the ability to travel in the city and the nature of public policies (or lack of therein) that address the multifarious needs of persons with disabilities. In essence, the design of work, transport, urban cityscapes, education or sport can be disabling and the (re) solution requires material changes to political practice, social roles, work, welfare and the (built) environment.

Social practices and the production of space are, therefore, mutually constitutive where the forces of production serve to construct social spaces (Lefebvre, 1991). Historically, the production of spaces in cities has constrained, limited and restricted the social capacities of persons with disabilities; on one level because of the “socio-spatial patterns and relations through which impairment is oppressed by dominant power relations” (Gleeson, 1999, p. 54) and on the other by “the socio-spatial experiences and practices of impaired people who must negotiate disabling power structures in their everyday lives” (ibid, p. 54). Lefebvre’s typology of social space includes public (e.g. public squares, transport hubs, stadia), intermediate (spaces of circulation or commerce – shopping malls, retail environment) and private sites (the home). We are particularly interested in the public and intermediary sites and how policies and practices developed as an outcome of, or associated with, major

sporting events impact on persons with disabilities. There are significant additional economic costs associated with disablement within urban environments and there are also psycho-social costs related to urban design and planning (Imrie, 1996) that make the everyday experience of living with an impairment doubly problematic – whether related to mobility, signage or building design. As Gleeson (1999) contends,

physical barriers, including broken surfaces on thoroughfares (streets, guttering, paving)...building architecture which excludes the entry of anyone unable to use stairs and hand-opened doors, public and private transport modes which assume that drivers and passengers are non-impaired, and public information (e.g., signage) presented in forms that assume a common level of visual and aural ability (p. 138).

Whilst forms of inaccessible design impact, variously, all residents of a city, they create greater oppression for persons with disabilities, reducing the ability to participate fully in urban life. It is the interplay of structures, institutions and people that bring about exclusionary spatial formations and experiences. Finally, it is important to acknowledge the progress that has been made in several countries around accessible building and planning legislation (the Disability Discrimination Act, 1995 and Equality Act 2005 are good examples from the UK) whilst recognising that their powers and outcomes are limited in their effectiveness, especially in being able to respond to a wide range of disablements that remain more or less visible in urban design thinking.

### **Sport events, space and the neoliberal city**

Major sporting events are often sold to political actors and residents on their potential to regenerate ‘problem’ areas with new infrastructures, including stadia, offices, houses and upgraded transport networks (Müller, 2015; Smith, 2014). Dansero, Mela and Rossignolo (2016) talk of the ‘extraordinary’ nature of major sporting events, representing “a temporary



spatial system, intended to last for the duration of the event, which rests and is superimposed on the hosting territory” (p. 100). Major sport events, because of their urgency and apparent necessity (Agamben, 2005) require spatial transformations that may be imposed on cities unprepared for the change. This can also lead to socio-spatial exclusions that have lasting impacts upon vulnerable populations directly affected by these interventions, including poor transport links to the urban centre (Broudehoux & Sanchez, 2015). As Gaffney (2015) suggests, uneven developments mean that city centre zones are cleansed and in receipt of significant investment whilst less strategically important communities are left to cope with poor environmental conditions, including the built environment and transport infrastructures – which impact negatively on accessibility and create increased social distance. This is only possible because of the unequal relationship between the incoming large urban project and its recipient. Dansero et al. (2016) use the term ‘project territory’ to reflect the special nature of major sport events and ‘context territory’ to refer to the host environment. Though making the case that a negotiation takes place between the two entities, much of the literature around the spatial configuration of major sport events suggests that the event project skews development priorities. Müller (2015) identifies three features of the ‘mega event syndrome’ that are relevant to the discussion here. He suggests that mega sport events produce an event takeover, whereby event priorities become planning priorities in host cities to the detriment of existing plans. Second, he argues that there is elite capture, whereby an inequitable distribution of resources results from investment going to some people and places instead of others. This leads to a spatially uneven urban landscape. Finally, Müller (2015) identifies an event fix whereby the major sporting event is viewed as a panacea, representing a solution for major planning challenges. This can lead to investment going to vanity projects and short term ‘fixes’ that rarely lead to sustainable change. In the context of CDT, these ideals become

exacerbated due to an ableist lens that regulates the ways in developments are understood – to serve those more able.

These critical debates are important because investments in venues for major sporting events that appear to represent exemplars of accessibility may do little to address the wider geographies of exclusion that persons with disabilities encounter in everyday life. Instead, what may result are (physically) accessible sporting venues set against a generally inaccessible urban realm. And yet, destinations seeking to host the largest disability sport event – the Paralympics Games - are expected to comply with International Paralympic Committee's standards for accessibility translated into an Accessibility Guide (IPC, 2015), which presents host cities with a strategic opportunity to embed accessible thinking across all areas involved in event planning. However, adherence to these requirements is inconsistent with the recent Rio 2016 Paralympic Games being heavily criticised for its failure to make significant enough progress on accessibility. As Dickson, Knijnik & Darcy (2016) suggest, “for a host city to be accessible for the event and beyond requires a range of facilitating factors, including policies, codes, legislation, funding, strong disability advocacy coalitions and education”. In the UK, sports governing bodies have had a legal duty since 1995 to make reasonable anticipatory adjustments to remove barriers which put persons with disabilities at a substantial disadvantage in accessing sport grounds to those who are able bodied. However, this policy has not been implemented successfully, with the UK Equality and Human Rights Commission (2015) recently arguing that, “despite the existing legal duty on sports bodies, in many cases spectators with disability are still not able to access sports stadia on par with able-bodied spectators”. There is evidence that newly constructed sporting facilities offer the “fewest physical barriers to disabled people...mainly due to new construction law requiring that public outlets be adjusted to meet the needs of people who are disabled or suffering from impairments” (Taylor & Jozefowicz, 2012, p.160). However, even then the provision of

generally accessible buildings (in terms of meeting legal obligations) does not necessarily lead to a more welcoming urban environment where persons with a disability can enjoy their right to equality in recreational settings (Yazigi, Resende & Yazigi, 2015).

Major sporting events can also be considered as active facilitators of the neo-liberalization of the city, driving spatial transformations, but with uneven outcomes – including for persons with disabilities. As Broudehoux and Sanchez (2015) suggest, the focus on major sporting events has “allowed market actors and a market logic to increasingly control urban governance...mega-events thus both accelerate and consolidate neoliberal hegemony and help secure the advances of private power holders over common interest” (p. 117). The mega event project territory, infused with neoliberalized, urban entrepreneurial thinking, is often imposed on the context territory of the cities that host events. The problem here is that little meaningful attention is paid to the wider social support, information and physical structures required by persons with disabilities, if constraints or barriers are to be overcome.

### **Research context and design**

In our research, we follow Chouinard et al. (2010) in adopting a critical geography of disability, looking to understand the disabling nature of the socio-spatial environment, as per a CDT lens, and investigating what impact the significant investments involved in major sporting event hosting can have on urban space in two major cities. In this paper we focus predominantly on the discursive (policies), institutional (governmental and non-governmental), and material (physical infrastructure) dimensions, rather than on the socio-spatial experiences of persons with disabilities themselves. We draw upon data gathered as part of a longitudinal, comparative study of the social value of major sporting events, examining differences between integrated (Glasgow Commonwealth Games) and non-

integrated (Toronto Parapan American Games) events for athletes with a disability. The Commonwealth Games were first presented as an integrated event for athletes with a disability at the Manchester, 2002 Games. For Glasgow 2014, there were five parasport disciplines, with 22 medal events. The Parapan Am Games are run on a model similar to the Olympic and Paralympic Games where the two events are separated by time and space, with the disability sport event following two weeks after the Pan Am Games.

The overall investigation examines several distinct, but related, lines of enquiry, exploring to what extent hosting major sporting events (1) offer the opportunity to access scarce resources to create more accessible infrastructure (e.g. sport and recreation facilities, transportation), (2) increase supportive services (i.e. coaching, volunteers, programmes), (3) gain access to specialised equipment, and (4) change attitudes about disability (Misener & Darcy 2014; Misener, McGillivray, McPherson & Legg, 2015). For this paper, we focus on the first of these lines of enquiry, exploring those spatial features of accessibility impacted by the hosting of major sporting events. Two case study sites, Toronto and Glasgow, were chosen. First, because both had been awarded the rights to host a major sporting event that included athletes with a disability – albeit the type of events was different (i.e. one integrated and one separate). Second, the host organizers for both events had made public pronouncements about the role of the event in bringing about progress on accessibility as a ‘legacy’ of hosting. Finally, in both Canada and the UK, governments have passed ‘progressive’ legislation pertaining to inclusion and equality in recent years that emphasize the importance of accessibility. The Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) and the Equalities Act (2005) affect the cities of Toronto and Glasgow, respectively.

For this paper, two primary sources of evidence are utilized. First, we draw on semi-structured interviews conducted with strategic personnel involved in the planning, organizing,

and staging of both major Games, before (Glasgow 2014, n=16; Toronto 2015, n=22) and after the event (Glasgow n = 5; Toronto n = 7). Interviewees came from a range of backgrounds, occupying roles including Heads of Legacy and Engagement, Mobility and Access Coordinators, City Councillors and/or Advisors, and Sport Venue Managers. These interviewees represented organizations ranging from municipalities or cities, provincial or regional governing bodies, and national governing bodies. This breadth allowed for nuanced perspectives of the event capabilities, reach, and policy imperatives.

The second method employed was direct observation. Observations were recorded using a template informed by the CDT framework, described earlier. Observations focused on the flows and circulations that took spectators, visitors and participants from the city centres to the main sporting venues. The authors experienced the journeys as others would, using the main transport routes and identifying accessibility features as they travelled. They spent extended periods of time in each host city during the Games, and post-event. Observations in and around the sporting venues focused on: physical accessible features; audible accessible features; signage and media communications accounting for accessibility; and the general impression of the accessibility of facilities. They noted where accessibility enhancements were temporary or permanent and explored the sustainability of these improvements via post-event observations, follow-up interviews and published policy and planning materials. In total, five event venues where parasport events took place were observed in Glasgow and a further seven venues in Toronto. Each member of the research team completed observation reflections for each day of the event and again six-weeks post event. Observations were then compared and discussed among the members of the research team to determine commonalities, distinctions, and crucial insights. While none of the members of the research team self-identifies as having a physical disability, each has extensive experience in research and working with disability. Thus, observations were used as a research tool similar to

ethnographic reflection, rather than an analytical tool of compliance or policy implementation (Watson & Till, 2010).

We did not specifically explore the lived experience of persons with disabilities, which is a limitation of the research. Follow up work being undertaken in the second part of this longitudinal study will seek the views of persons with disabilities on their lived experience of the event city.

In presenting results from the two case studies we focus on two main themes. First, we consider the problematic emerging from the relationship between the sport event organizing body and the local state in each case city. Second, we consider the temporal nature of the transformations produced by major sporting event hosting, drawing attention to the limited nature of change generated by a one-off event project.

### **Sporting events, governance and accessibility**

The local state and its strategic partners invest in major sports events believing that they can act as a catalyst for broader urban transformations – which they normally view as positive (Foley et al, 2012). It was clear from our study that in both Glasgow and Toronto the local state considered the hosting of a major sporting event an ideal opportunity to accelerate urban accessibility improvements. There was evidence of clear intent, both from the organizing committees and their governmental partners, to use the event as a means of progressing an accessibility agenda. Glasgow took the unique step of appointing a Head of Legacy and Engagement within its organizing committee, creating a committee for accessibility, appointing an Accessibility Manager and creating a working group formed from pivotal personnel in Scotland's key agencies such as Transport Scotland, EventScotland, Scottish Government and Glasgow City Council to look at transport and accessibility from venue to venue, and in the city more generally.

The Toronto organizing committee employed three managers overseeing the parasport element of the Games, in 50 different functional areas. As the Parapan Games are governed by the IPC, all sporting venues needed to meet or exceed their accessibility guidelines. The Director of Parapan Planning and Integration previously worked on the 2010 Vancouver Paralympic Games, and was brought in to the organizing committee after the Senior Vice-President, Sport and Venues insisted on having a distinct presence to focus on the Parapan elements three years into the planning process. Additionally, there was political will to increase accessibility in the province of Ontario with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (2005) and an additional staff member with expertise in broader accessibility issues was seconded to the organizing committee from the Accessibility Directorate of Ontario.

Interviewees from both cities also suggested that improvements in sporting venues and beyond would be secured because of the significant resource investments accompanying each event, reinforcing the ‘event-as-catalyst’ or ‘leveraging agent’ (Chalip, 2006) prevalent in the event studies literature,

You can use these opportunities to leverage. Clearly without those kinds of major events you would never get the major infrastructure that’s required so I still have to say that’s one of the big things. That infrastructure just wouldn’t be there (President, Canadian Paralympic Committee)

The Games has allowed us to move the thing along at least a bit quicker...disability and accessibility issues, have a similar type of character, we’re able to do much more much more quickly as a result of the Games (Lead Council Representative on Commonwealth Games, Glasgow City Council)

There was an evident belief by organizers that event investment would result in an influx of additional resources to fast-track development projects. The urgency (Broudehoux & Sanchez, 2015), or accelerator effect, of investment in a major sporting event was also viewed as a means to pursue broader social change objectives,

An injection of funding like this presents an opportunity to use that funding in a way that's responsible. So when we think about building new venues, why wouldn't we work as hard as we can to build a new venue in a way that makes it accessible?

(TO2015 Director of Human Resources & Diversity and Inclusion)

There was also evidence of accessibility being viewed as a commercial opportunity in both case cities. For example, under the banner of Accessible Tourism, the Glasgow 2014 Organising Committee (hereafter, G2014 Ltd) sought to lever the influence of its strategic partners to proactively enhance general accessibility on the basis that this could bring access to new markets and new business opportunities. As the G2014 Ltd CEO suggested,

This is not just the right thing to do it's the smart thing to do...we've started to change this mainstream thinking with hotels and getting others to advocate on behalf of this for the greater purpose. But also it drives more business. It's good business.

This example was mirrored in Toronto where 'inclusivity' referred to the enhancement of public space in and around the sporting venues and beyond, creating a "seamless, well-structured experience for the visitors to this city" (TO2015, CEO). The Toronto OC supported a (poorly attended) accessible tourism forum only two months in advance of the Games attempting to encourage local tourism operators to offer more accessible options for visitors. They also supported the development of an App (AccessNow) that offered visitors and residents accessible options for restaurants, transport, and other entertainment related venues in the city (TO2015 Director of Parapan Integration).



However, despite these apparently progressive policies connected to the two Games, the effectiveness of using events as a means of accelerating urban developments has been subject to much debate in the urban studies and event studies literature (Smith, 2014; Mueller, 2015). There are significant governance and resourcing limitations that act as an impediment to the achievement of longer term, sustainable outcomes, several of which align with the findings of this study. The first of these relates to temporality, especially in relation to event organizers. Utilizing narratives of urgency associated with event delivery, organizing committees can initiate and drive forward an accessibility agenda but its political and economic clout is limited by the fact that this organization disbands soon after completion of the Games. The limitations of the organizing committee are clear from the following comment,

our role comes in as a facilitator to be able to make those connections happen and help push the agenda forward knowing that it had to be other organizations that really held the responsibility and would be able to do that follow up after the Games (Director of Parapan Planning and Integration, TO2015)

The organizing committee for the Glasgow Commonwealth Games confirmed that others had the responsibility to embed temporary improvements in urban accessibility, arguing that “we planted all the seeds, we’ve invoked this, we’ve given them the opportunity, we’ve given them all the arguments out there why this is good” (CEO, G2014 Ltd). Second, the primary responsibility of the organizing committees in both Glasgow and Toronto was to ensure accessibility in and around sport venues for their respective Games. This responsibility included managing the temporary overlay of some venues and ensuring Games-time transport routes were inclusive. However, it became clear that they could do little more than encourage and cajole venue owners, transport providers and other service organizations to sustain good practice beyond the duration of the event. The Director of Parapan Planning and Integration,

TO2015 illustrated the problem suggesting that, “if I’m being totally honest I have been very disappointed with the lack of interest from the venue owners to actually partner to make those enhancements in a permanent way”. If partner agencies themselves are not in a position to maximize the opportunity provided by event seed capital (Chalip, 2006) then intended legacies are unlikely to materialize. A representative from the Mobility Access Committee for Scotland (MACS) summarized the obstacles to meaningful accessible transport legacies from the Glasgow 2014 Commonwealth Games,

There is no single body in Glasgow that deals with all of these issues. We’re relying on a number of corporations, a number of parties...so they’re all completely individual organizations. There’s no one body with overall responsibility...I don’t think people have thought in terms of legacy, in terms of the transport aspects sufficiently.

The problems described here cannot be reduced to the failings of organizing committees, as the enforcement of accessibility standards in the built environment is the responsibility of various levels of government, whether local (municipal), regional (provincial) or central (federal). Even then, that responsibility is difficult to prosecute, when powers are limited,

We can try and dangle as many carrots as we can and we can try and make people do things out of the goodness of their heart but until there’s money or there’s fear of liability or enforcement like there is in the US, it’s very difficult to have a real impact.

There is little doubt that both Games provided the financial support and urgency to ensure sport venues were made more accessible. However, unless there are legislative changes or increased political will to progress the accessibility agenda through major urban projects like major sporting events, then the outcome is likely to be short-term horizon failure where too much emphasis is placed on winning an event over longer term sustainable change (Bozeman, 2002).

Organizing committees are, ultimately, accountable for delivery of the Games and not for the legacies they produce. This was clearly demonstrated in the Toronto case. For the 2015 Parapan Am Games, the organizing committee undertook accessibility audits of all venues to be used for the Games including competition venues, practice venues, meeting spaces, hospitality service venues, and related areas. Under the auspices of Service Ontario's Accessibility for Ontarians with a Disability Act (AODA), each of the venues was given a summary report about their opportunities for increasing accessibility and further meeting the AODA standards. Less than 25% of the venues succeeded in making any of the accessibility changes beyond the minimum mandatory requirements of the sporting venues.

These findings about the incongruity between organizing committees and the local state are unsurprising. For example, Müller (2015) suggests that planning decisions relating to the hosting of major sporting events tend to benefit agents of capital accumulation to the detriment of equitable development for the marginalized, excluded and powerless (including persons with disabilities). Those public infrastructural works that are prioritized, including airport links, central urban to venues or hotel transport corridors enable the flow and circulation of mobile capital in the form of tourism, hospitality and business. 'Mobility' is enabled for some actors and disabled for others (Smith, 2015; Frew & McGillivray, 2015). The lives of local residents around major sporting event zones (including Games venues and festival sites) are disrupted with punitive parking restrictions, temporary road closures and transport re-routes impacting on those with and those without additional support needs. As Gaffney (2015) observes, the idea that secondary benefits might trickle down to disadvantaged groups is suspect, mirroring the economic rhetoric that political and business actors foreground in bids to gain the support of the local population. The sporting event city frames spatial arrangements within a neoliberal imperative to open the urban realm up for market exploitation, which generates tensions with narratives of accessibility. Under this

neoliberal logic, prioritization for making the urban environment accessible is given to those designated commercial corridors (or zones) where production and consumption practices are important, including facilitating opportunities for increased tourism inflows (e.g. city centre zones, retail, entertainment, hotels and sport complexes). For example, in advance of the Glasgow Commonwealth Games, the local state ‘beautified’ key arterial routes (new paving, painted shopfronts, tree planting) through the city centre, including its principal retail and entertainment zones. Our study showed that ensuring sporting venues were ready to welcome athletes and spectators were the primary focus of organizers in the build-up to and delivery of both event projects. Whilst venue provision is important, long-term considerations were not a priority. In many event venues, to meet accessibility requirements, temporary overlays were used for the duration of the Games but removed once the event was complete. As the TO2015 Accessibility Advisor explained, “Overlay was like our simple renovating budget costs that when Games takes over a site there’s going to be some costs involved, like spectator stands or security”

While the focus on accessible venues certainly produced some positive immediate actions around accessibility, we found that its ongoing impact was limited. These problematics align closely with what Müller (2015) has identified as the mega event *syndrome*, especially the ‘event takeover’ and ‘event fix’ symptoms, which emphasize the event project itself taking on an importance beyond the needs of the local development agenda and directing resources to suit largess projects that displace broader urban infrastructural needs.

### **Event projects and temporality**

From the CDT perspective, attitudes, social support, information and physical structures each need to be addressed if the constraints or barriers experienced by persons with

disabilities are to be overcome (Devlin & Pothier, 2006 & Chouinard et al, 2010). Our study found evidence that investment in high quality, international-standard sporting venues designed to attract and accommodate major sporting events like the Commonwealth Games or the Parapan Am Games does little to address more systemic exclusion of persons with disabilities in the urban realm.

Under a neo-liberal economic model, investment from local government in international standard venues requires a market return that invariably works against the public good rationale for sport and recreation provision. One of Glasgow 2014's premier sporting venues, the Emirates Arena, faced sizeable income targets to compensate for the initial high capital investment. Though the venue met all physical accessibility standards, it was not readily available for use by marginalized social groups, including persons with disabilities, partly because "there's a perception issue about the Arena as an events venue" (Venue Manager). Whilst excellent built environment accessibility standards are to be welcomed, their value is diminished without addressing other constraints to participation including cost, transportation and, in particular, programming (Darcy, 2001).

There is also a tension between the valorization of iconic sporting spaces and the advent of more fully accessible urban environments where all can move easily through the spaces as they go about their everyday lives. The everyday experience of navigating both Glasgow and Toronto from the perspective of people with additional support needs is variable and inconsistent. We found that investments made as a result of both the Commonwealth and Parapan Am Games, provide *uber*-accessible sports facilities, exceeding international accessibility standards, exemplary venue-to-venue transport networks developed in the name of the Games, and enhancements to signage to ensure the Games-time experience met sanctioning body and visitor expectations. However, we also observed that these enhancements were often temporary, addressing the short-term demands of Games delivery,

of the project territory (Dansero et al, 2016). What is missing here is a broader conception of accessibility - one that recognizes, and embeds in urban design thinking, the needs of a wider segment of the population. Lack of knowledge contributes to the problem,

Providing accessible spaces is seldom very much more expensive than providing regular spaces, I'll just say it that way. People have a bit of a myth that it's going to cost so much to create accessible spaces when in fact that's not true (Executive Director, Abilities Centre Activity Centre)

Our study found that the focus on accessible buildings tends to skew investment towards bricks and mortar, when a more inclusive understanding of the social and cultural materialities of disability (Imrie, 1996) is necessary, from a universal access perspective. Crucial to a CDT perspective on inclusive design is to ensure that persons with disabilities are involved meaningfully at each stage of development, rather than being 'consulted' after the event. As the Glasgow 2014 Ltd Accessibility Manager suggests, "one of the biggest things, where we could make a real step-forward change is to get access included right from the start, not at the last minute. Access groups need to be absolutely into it right from the start". Whilst in both Glasgow and Toronto there were disability reference groups in place, we found that their influence tended to be low, and they were often left feeling side-lined in decision making, reinforcing Gleeson's (1999) view that disabled people "have largely been oppressed by the production of space is due in part to their exclusion from the discourses and practices that shape the physical layout of societies" (p.2). In Glasgow, lack of priority given to accessibility issues meant that only in the last year were some significant access issues surfaced. As the Glasgow 2014 Ltd Accessibility Manager suggests, "we did invite them in to scrutinize the plans but we didn't have time to take them through every single corridor, every single fixture. We didn't have the time and we ended up just going through very quickly". Major sport events represent significant investments in urban design and yet evidence from

our study suggests that the opportunity to enshrine enabling justice in “producing environments which liberate the social capacities of all people” (Gleeson, 1999, p128) was not realized. The voices of person with disabilities themselves were not heard adequately as priority was given to *delivery* over longer-term *legacies*,

when it comes to legacy these people aren’t going to be there. And whether you’ll still be able to make a journey from Dalmarnock station to any of these venues after the event is another matter altogether... I don’t think people have thought in terms of legacy in terms of the transport aspects sufficiently” (Representative, Mobility Access Committee for Scotland).

So, whilst investment in accessible amenities (e.g. toilets and entrances) in sporting venues comply with international standards, important transport hubs are not bound by the same strictures, “if you’re a small café you have to provide an accessible toilet...a multi-million pound refurbishment of a rail station does not even have to provide a toilet” (Accessibility Manager, G2014 Ltd). As others have suggested, major event projects enable, accelerate and prioritize development agendas that align with the objectives of the entrepreneurial local state (Broudehoux & Sanchez, 2015) but in the production of space that results fails to address disabling dimensions. Our study found that the local or national state’s legislative impotence impacts negatively on the potential of Games-related investments to be turned into sustainable legacies for persons with disabilities. In Glasgow, there was recognition from the local state that accessibility improvements outside the primary event zones were likely to be problematic because of fiscal constraints. A new train station next to the main event zone was built into the overall Games budget but this was not accompanied by major transport network improvements in other parts of the city. The smoothness of shiny new sporting facilities with exemplary visual signage was contrasted with little material change to the old, rough transport routes and inconsistent signage (outside of the commercial urban centre). A similar

situation was seen in Toronto where only a limited level of the transport network was accessible and upgrades were made only to key Games venue locations.

We also found that the opportunity the Games represents to embed greater knowledge and awareness (information) of accessibility in the activities of those responsible for urban design, planning and policy beyond the duration of the Games was not exploited. Primarily, this related to a failure to view the Games as an opportunity to initiate change in the way accessibility is viewed, more generally, “I don’t know if this transfer of knowledge is going to be...visible to local authorities for example. It shouldn’t just be transferrable from one OC to another. It should be transferable to Scottish Government, to Glasgow, to Strathclyde, to the whole of Scotland” (Accessibility Manager, G2014 Ltd). Currently, host cities are mandated to share their knowledge with their successor host (in Glasgow’s case Gold Coast 2018) but there is no equivalent requirement *within* host cities themselves to ensure learning is shared effectively to benefit local citizens. This finding reinforces the problematic associated with the ‘parachuting’ in of external consultants and temporary planners, that leads to an unsustainable approach as the project territory (the event) takes precedence over the needs of the context territory (Dansero et al, 2016). Specifically, decisions over transport, venues, signage and supporting information are made by transitory event ‘experts’ who are unaccountable once the event overlay is removed.

Despite the evidence of missed opportunities to lever the two Games effectively to raise the profile of accessibility, our study did find some evidence that, at a local level (in one of Toronto’s municipalities) more holistic, strategic plans to exploit the political and economic lever of the Games were in place and producing positive outcomes, albeit from an already highly successful fully accessible facility,

We’re using sport and the profile of the Parapan Am Games to push the agenda

forward a little bit on services and programs for people with disabilities that may be



outside the sport area...the Accessibility Directorate has provided some funding for us to go out into the community and work with some businesses to assist them to become more accessible, and showing them how they can do that at very little cost (Executive Director of the Abilities Centre)

This example, whilst relatively isolated, demonstrates that with strategic foresight, translated into real and meaningful actions at the local level, the priority given to issues of accessibility for persons with disabilities can be raised and lead to longer-term gains. In the two cases discussed here, Glasgow 2014 Commonwealth Games and Toronto 2015 Parapan American Games, the event had some positive spatial impacts in terms of the accessible nature of new and existing sporting venues and some important transport routes. However, overall the temporary and episodic nature of major sporting events means that the political and economic resources required to enhance broader urban accessibility are not present.

## **Conclusions**

Investment in major sporting events brings high quality sporting venues and facilities to a host city. These facilities can produce material improvements in the physical (and to some extent the social) accessibility of these spaces, including often being designed to improve the user experience for a wider segment of the population with physical accessibility needs. However, our study has demonstrated that developments are unequal, with benefits poorly distributed, doing little to address the systematic barriers persons with disabilities face in the urban environment, post-Games. Whilst not to underestimate the importance of any financial investment in enhanced urban accessibility, without the strategic integration of sporting venues with other public and intermediary spaces (Lefebvre, 1991) there is a danger that organizers presume and (pronounce) that accessibility has been achieved.

Given the importance of the economic imperative in the rationale for hosting major sporting events for the host destination it is unsurprising that enhancing accessibility has a lower priority, unless it brings the promise of market return. Moreover, whilst improvements to arterial routes and main transport hubs are built into the bidding for major sporting events, the less important transport routes, sport venues and elements of the civic realm are left relatively untouched by the sporting circus passing through town. Our study confirms that the mega-spectacle of events benefits agents of capital accumulation (tourism and sporting venues) over the marginalized, excluded and powerless. In particular, we suggest that the everyday experience of disability outside of sports venues is unlikely to be materially improved, despite significant levels of investment in event projects and strict guidelines from international governing bodies. This is primarily because there are structural weaknesses in the organization and governance of these events that prioritizes the delivery of short-term imperatives – hosting the best event – over the achievement of longer-term material improvements. Where material improvement is evident, it primarily revolves around enabling greater flows of mobile capital, further reinforcing the unevenness of opportunities for persons with disabilities to navigate urban public space effectively. Our CDT theoretical framework suggested that communication, information and physical structures needed to be foregrounded if the rhetorical statements made by major event organizers were to be materialized. This study suggests that in event planning these remained of secondary importance to organizers, reinforcing rather than ameliorating geographies of exclusion.

We recognize the need to include the voices of persons with disabilities in further research into geographies of exclusion, post-Games so that the journey through urban space is explored as a lived experience. However, from our explorations of the policy level and operational realities of planning for and delivering two major sporting events designed to address the needs of persons with disabilities, we are left unconvinced that the organizational

rhetoric translates into tangible benefits, especially in the medium to long term. As Reid (2014) notes in the quote that opened this paper, the problem comes at the edges, when the new meets the old and the rough edges grate against the smooth surfaces. Major sporting events can remove some rough edges, but without the political and economic will persons with disabilities will continue to encounter disabling environments as they navigate the eventful city.

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